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Drought will test the military government

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A fierce drought caused by climate change and El Niño has put Thailand at risk of a human catastrophe of a scale not witnessed for decades. The problem is exacerbated by poor water management. The situation is particularly acute in the Northeast, where the Ubonratana Dam in Khon Kaen is at only 27% of capacity and farmers have been ordered not to grow second crops or farm fish as water must be reserved for drinking.

In desperate attempts to sustain illicitly grown second crops, farmers are directly sinking wells into dried-up river beds. These supplement the 4,300 wells the National Water Board is drilling at temples, schools and farms, with 1,250 already drilled since October. With the drought forecast to end in early June, water rationing, announced in three provinces, is set to test the military government's mettle as multiple districts in 14 provinces nationwide have been declared disaster zones.

In Thailand, water was a deciding factor for people in search of settlement. However, the 13-fold increase in population in the last century led to massive deforestation for rice cultivation. This has transformed land from a "sponge" nature to one with rapid runoffs. Use of irrigation has intensified to coax crops from normally arid soil and to support an increasing trade in fish and shrimp. Moreover, a major initiative to build dams for water supplies and electricity, begun in the 1960s, has supported the development of cities and industrial estates, especially since the 1990s.



4 Warning Signs Of Dementia. #2 Is Scary



A national drought presents challenges to these man-made systems at multiple levels. At the local level, the drilling of community wells is one response, though in the Northeast, such wells have to be drilled up to 300 meters deep in order to reach the water table. As the area was once a sea, the risk exists of pumping salty water onto crops and killing them. Moreover, over-pumping from the water table can cause sinkholes, as with Florida strawberry farming. In the long run, more village reservoirs need to be dug, and existing local water catchments need to be deepened, to utilise rain water.

At the provincial level responses must counter the impact the drought will have on people's protein intake, as water supplies will not be enough to support basket fish farming in rivers, shrimp farming or even opportunistic fishing. The resulting drop in available protein will impact Thailand's poor most heavily, with the risk of permanently affecting children's development. One in six Thai children under five, or 16.3%, already suffer from stunting, meaning they are too short for their age, with

from 2010 compared to 2005, with the number of education and children left with elderly relatives being contributing factors.

Another malnutrition-related disease of the poor is wasting, children who are too thin for their age. This affects 6.7% of children under five nationally. Thus, provincial administrative offices need to provide supplemental protein, especially in the form of milk, and to begin monitoring drought-affected districts for these poverty-related diseases.

At the regional level, there is a need to avoid water conflicts, as with the drought last year when upstream farmers ignored government directions not to pump water from rivers and the military had to be dispatched to protect scarce water resources. An adequate flow rate in Thailand's major riverine resources into the Central Plains is essential for agriculture in Thailand's rice basket as well as for tap-water in major cities, particularly Bangkok.

Nationally, water management has become politicised, with politicians intervening to control sluice gates. However, this is one area where technocrats need to be trusted, and, if they fail, fired. Thailand has a long history of developing expertise in water management, and certain areas of central government are implementing well-directed plans.

The Department of Agricultural Extension, for example, is transitioning tens of thousands of farmers to alternative crops which require less water, such as sugar cane, maize, and mung beans. These programmes need to be sustained for decades to wean farmers off rice mono-cropping.

Finally, long-term planning ideas such as sea walls to cope with rising sea levels need to be reconsidered. Additional "monkey cheek" water-retention basins, pursued by the present government to combat flooding, can also ensure regions are self-sufficient in water for the long-term, as can a sensitively-implemented national reforestation plan.

Crucially, these measures must be responsive to constituents, accountable, and equitably distributed to prevent intra-regional water conflicts along political or ethnic lines. Disasters such as drought and flooding are associated more with authoritarian regimes, whether due to a "parliamentary dictatorship" or military governments, as compared to

availability . This is due to democracies having better feedback loops

including elections, public criticism and a freer media.

As both flood and drought in a semi-tropical country are direct consequences of poor water management, it is appropriate to recall the classic example of a highly-responsive democratic government to a water disaster. In response to the 1953 North Sea flood, which killed 1,836 people in the Netherlands, the Dutch government vowed "never again" and developed the Delta Programme. Over 45 years, this completely re-engineered the landscape through a system of dams and storm barriers.

For the counter-example of an unresponsive government, Thais need look no further than the Bangkok governor, who suggested Bangkokians move to mountains following a March 2015 flash flood, and who has resisted calls from his own political party to resign and instead developed an autocracy.

Thailand is not alone in experiencing water-related crises. A worsening cycle of extreme meteorological conditions worldwide due to greenhouse gases from industrialisation fits scientific predictions by the International Panel on Climate Change. Each additional climate-related catastrophe should be a reminder to governments, whether present or future, to increase the use of alternative energy and to be responsive to the public. The stewardship of countries is at stake.

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